

Statement by Representative Wilson Arias Castillo of the Colombian Chamber of Representatives of the Colombian Congress to the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission of the United States Congress

The first agenda item of the peace negotiations between the Colombian Government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia - FARC EP is rural development and access to land. On this point, their partial agreement has been publicly disclosed in an official statement and includes investments in infrastructure, health, education, housing, a special agrarian jurisdiction, social security, legalization of property, the promotion of Peasant Reserve Zones, and the creation of a **Land Bank** for the free distribution of land.

Meanwhile, Colombia has been living through a rapid process of denationalization and land concentration, particularly in the Altillanura, an eastern region of the country that has been called the "last great agricultural frontier." We have denounced this situation from our vantage point in the Colombian Congress because it worsens land concentration, a persistent historical problem and a key source of armed conflict.

Important domestic and foreign companies have purchased large tracts of land for agroindustrial projects or for speculation. Key among them are multinationals like Cargill, Monica Semillas, and Poligrow, and local entities like Riopaila Castilla, Manuelita, and Luis Carlos Sarmiento, owner of the AVAL group.

In order to do this, they violated Colombian law, particularly the land reform Law 160 of 1994, which states that public lands (vacant or *baldíos*) must be allocated to poor peasants and can not be subsequently accumulated in areas exceeding those initially delivered to the peasants. The Riopaila and Cargill companies had the assistance of the law firm Brigard&Urrutia to circumvent the legal restrictions on land accumulation, at the time when the firm was led by Carlos Urrutia Valenzuela, Colombian Ambassador to the United States. Because of this scandal, he had to resign from his post in July, but inexplicably, still continues to lead the Colombian Embassy in Washington, D.C.

This land grabbing has advanced with the consent of the Colombian State, mainly from the Santos and Uribe governments, which have invited large agrobusiness entrepreneurs to invest in the area and have tried repeatedly to change the existing legislation to accomodate it to those interests. There has also been the persecution and forced exit of government officials involved in these issues, simply because they have attempted to fulfill their obligation to ensure the full observance and implementation of the agrarian reform law.

In the same vein, we have denounced the so-called Law of Victims and Land Restitution, promoted by President Juan Manuel Santos, as a calculated decision designed to stimulate the land market, according to the World Bank, so that the land falls into the hands of big corporations, which the Government considers to be the most efficient actors. We do not believe that there is an attempt to repair the damage caused to the victims of Colombia's long conflict and base this on official estimates prior to the implementation of the law, according to which only 10.4% of the victims were expected

to return to their land; on the emerging land restitution process which barely approaches 200 sentences after nearly three years of operation; and on the serious allegations about the safety of victims and restitution leaders, presented for example in the Human Rights Watch report The Risk of Returning Home.

Clearly, there is a contradiction between agreeing in the Peace Process to reform Colombian rural policy and creating a Land Bank, while on the other hand promoting agribusiness processes, which in spite of existing law, continue to concentrate large tracts of land while receiving state subsidies, which should instead be directed to promote the rural peasant economy and democratize the Colombian countryside.